

Communication by Non Humans: The Case of the “Talking Drum” in the Bakossi Community

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As an aftermath of globalization and also as a response to the call of the UNESCO to preserve our languages and cultures as part of the intangible heritage for humanity, many African countries have become keenly aware of the need to document their languages and cultures. The knowledge of such cultures can fully give a strong basis to African future generations to propose better legal practices for Africans that are rooted in their own cultures. It is in line with this that the present paper seeks to document one of the traditional practices of the Bakossi people who make use of the talking drum to exchange various messages. The paper explores different usages of the talking drum by the Bakossi people and shows that it is indeed a means of communication within their community.

Keywords: communication, non humans, talking drum, community, Bakossi

Introduction

Speaking can be defined as the act of expressing ideas, thoughts, or opinions about something. As for communication, the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (2010) defines it as “the process of giving information or making emotions or ideas known to someone” (p. 277). Considering the definition above, it is clear that speaking and communication are processes that involve only human beings, because they are the only living beings who actually possess a language faculty and can thus communicate using languages. This is, however, not completely true, because as this paper intends to show, drums are indeed a means of communication in the Bakossi community. They are used along with other instruments to pass across information to the people in the form of informing, warning, inviting, and worship. Different signals are produced at different times within the day for these different purposes.

Drums have served as an early form of long distance communication, and used during ceremonial and religious functions. According to *Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia*, the talking drum is primarily used in ceremonial settings which include dance, rituals, story-telling, and communication of points of order. The talking drum is an hourglass-shaped drum from West Africa, whose pitch can be regulated to mimic the tone and prosody of human speech. It has two drumheads connected by leather tension cords, which allow the player to modulate the pitch of the drum by squeezing the cords between his arm and body.

The use of talking drums as a form of communication was noticed by Europeans in the first half of the 18th century. Detailed messages could be sent from one village to another faster than could be carried by a person

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riding a horse. An English emigrant to Africa, John F. Carrington, in his book *The Talking Drums of Africa* (1949) explained how African drummers were able to communicate complex messages over vast distances. Using low tones referred to as male and higher female tones, the drummer communicates through the phrases and pauses, which can travel upwards of 4-5 miles. This process may take eight times longer than communicating a normal sentence but was effective for telling neighboring villages of possible attacks or ceremonies.

Today, the talking drum is still used for communication in the Bakossi community. It is used to praise gods and people's names. It is used to invoke the spirits of the Bakossi ancestors and deities. It is used to correct the errors of the societies. It is used to tell the history of the past, to teach people how to cope with the present and how to prepare for the future. As highlighted by Finnegan (2012), the messages sent via drums are not confined to utilitarian messages with a marginally literary flavor. Drum languages could also be used for specific literary forms, for proverbs, panegyrics, historical poems, dirges, and in some cultures for practically any kind of poetry.

Drums as a Communication Means for Warning People

As already mentioned, the Bakossi people use drums to send out information of all sort to the entire community. One type of information that they send out to people at the same time is a warning signal. From the history of the Bakossi people, it is alleged that they had many enemies and intruders from the other parts of the country who wanted to take over their land (oral communication). The Bakossi people then devised a means of communicating to themselves without the intruders knowing what they were planning. In this way, they could take the invaders by surprise. Thus, once anyone sensed that there is an invader or enemy around, they will use the "talking drum" to alert the entire community so that no one goes out of their houses. They equally used it to plan on how to attack the invader, since coming together to make such plans will make them vulnerable and expose them to the enemy. The beats of the drum at such a time is so unique and distinct and goes on for about five minutes, so that everyone will know that there is danger in the community. Women and children may not get the details of the message passed across, but they will know that they have to stay indoors. Men on the other hand will understand the details of the message and will act in a respective way.

Equally, when the people sense any form of danger within the community, they will use the "talking drum" as a warning for people to keep to their houses especially at night. It could be that armed thieves have broken into someone's house, or that some stray wild animal has left the forest and is roaming the villages of the community (note that the Bakossi community is surrounded by forest). Such a sound comes with a somewhat slow beat and goes on for a shorter time (two to three minutes), calling upon people to keep within their houses especially at night.

In the Bakossi community, there are certain "masquerades" (juju) which are considered dangerous when seen by women, children, and men who have not been initiated. These "masquerades" visit the community from time to time to do some cleansing rituals or any other thing as required by the people. On the eve of the day a "masquerade" is to visit the community, the "talking drum" is used to alert people of such a visit. The beats of the drum at that time is different from those mentioned above which signal danger of some sort. Generally, the drum is done at a regular triple beat rhythm, interspaced with silence, and takes longer time (10 minutes and more). This warning is done well in advance so as to keep the men who are initiated away from the path taken by the masquerade, and to keep the women, children and uninitiated men indoors that night. A violation of this warning comes along with serious consequences that may even lead to death.

Drums as a Communication Means for Inviting People

The Bakossi people also use the talking drum as a means of invitation. Drums have been an effective means of communication for generations within the Bakossi community. Different patterns of sounds on the drum are used to summon members of a community together for things like meetings, ceremonies, community work, and so on. The communication is done in a way that the members of the community know the exact place of assembly, the type of work they are expected to do and what they are to bring along.

Invitational drums are the most common ones found within the Bakossi community as their purpose is wide and varied. In the Bakossi community, drums are often used at different traditional ceremonies which include installation of chiefs, traditional worship ceremonies, traditional therapeutic treatment, exorcism and other traditional initiation ceremonies. Every occasion has its own distinct tune and pattern on the drums.

In general, invitation sounds are heard in the early hours of the morning or mid-morning period. These sounds normally have a rolling beat which varies in relation to the specific occasion. They sound regular and happy and, as already mentioned, they could be sounds inviting people to wake up in the morning, reminding them to attend a particular function or inviting them to a meeting or a ceremony.

Drums as a Communication Means for Informing

Most Bakossi communities have a time keeper who uses the talking drum to inform people of the time of the day. The Bakossi people relied on the talking drum in the past as people of today rely on their watches. At the top of every hour, the time keeper will drum continuously for about five minutes everyday. The drumming takes place between 4am to 10pm daily because the people are expected to be sleeping between 10pm and 4am. The 4am drum beats are an early call for those who have plans of carrying out certain activities in the very early hours of the day. It is important to note that the Bakossi people are mainly farmers, with most of them having farms located so many kilometers away from their homes where they have to walk for several hours to get to the destinations. With this early wake up call, they are able to plan their activities well and leave their homes as early as 5am so as to be at their farms by 7am at the latest. Throughout the day, the hourly drumming of the talking drum reminds everyone of what time it is at a particular point, and this helps them to know when they should leave one place for another.

There are many drum rhythms that simply express the joy of life. In the Bakossi culture, there is a calendar of joyful ritual events in which the different villages or clans frequently dance from dusk until dawn. People are usually informed of such events in advance through the talking drum. On the day of such an event, the people are informed of the venue and time through the talking drum. Once the drumming begins, people know that they are now expected to be on the venue, and by following the music from the drumming they are able to trace the venue. The drum beats for such ceremonies usually have a joyous melody and the drumming is continuous. Many people join in, so there is usually a lot of call and response with people singing in answer to the drums. The drumming and dancing have a significant role in the lives of the people. Not only do the people who play the drums at this time enjoy them, but also the participants—both those who are singing and dancing as well as those who are just listening and watching. These events are about celebrating together, as a tribe, a clan, or a village. Such celebrations usually allow for continuity in passing on folk traditions from generation to generation.

The talking drum is also used to inform people about the death of someone. Drum beats informing other

people about the death of someone are most often followed with mourning sounds from the compound in which someone is dead. This way of communicating death information is still used today, and the beatings are so melancholic that they even instill fear in people particularly women and children. Most often if this happens late at night, women and children (except for those directly concerned) will stay in their various houses and only men will go to the house of the deceased.

Drums as a Communication Means During Worship and Healing Rituals

Drums are used in traditional worship to evoke ancestral spirits. The use of drums has been recognized as being able to put people into spiritual trances throughout history. According to the Bakossi tradition, the dead and the living have various means of communicating to each other. One of these means of communication is by the use of the “talking drum”. During traditional worship and healing, instruments like drums are played accompanied with special songs and dances. Both the drums and the music they play are sacred and cannot be played anywhere else. The talking drum at this time is considered to be handling communication between the world of the living and the world of the dead or ancestors (spirit world).

Drummers during such occasions are generally people who are very versed with the Bakossi tradition. As the drum is being played, the traditional healer dances and invokes the ancestors to send their healing powers. Only the traditional healer has the right to speak at the time. As he carries out the incantations, the talking drum repeats the message with specific beat sounds.

This type of drumming is always done late at night and far away from the people, usually close to the forest. The techniques of playing drums during such ceremonies are clearly different from when it is played during other occasions and the techniques vary from tribe to tribe. The beats of the drum are strong, gloomy and take longer time than any other drumming beats.

Conclusion

Drums are a wonderful instrument, and they have beautiful sounding. In the Bakossi community, drums are very important in people’s daily life. The Bakossi people use the talking drum in many different ways, for sending messages to the people in town or some time to send message to the next village, for traditional and other ceremonies, for invitational purposes, and for healing people who are sick and carrying out ancestral worship.

This paper has shown that there can be communication by non-humans as it is the case with the talking drum. The paper reveals the special place of the talking drum in the lives of the Bakossi people. In addition to being entertaining and to adding to the musical quality of a song, the talking drum holds a deeper symbolic and historical meaning in the Bakossi community.

Drums are almost always an accompaniment for any manner of ceremony—births, deaths, marriages—together with a ritual dance. This paper has shown that the Bakossi people effectively use the talking drum during these ceremonies and that they indeed exchange different messages at each point in time. There is a clear difference in the playing styles of the talking drum depending on the specific occasion, and the message to be passed across.

The paper also reveals that the talking drum plays an important role in every aspect of the lives of the Bakossi people, including the physical, emotional and spiritual. The talking drum is played to communicate

specific information, celebrate, mourn, invoke and inspire. It is played at all times of the day as the need arises. The talking drum is actually a large part of the daily experience of the Bakossi people. It cannot be separated from their culture. The talking drum imitates the pitch patterns of language of the people and transmits messages over many miles.

However, in the modern Bakossi, very few people can discern coded drum messages sounded on the talking drum. Drums are still used in the Bakossi communities to gather people for communal work. The work activities include digging roads, building houses for the vulnerable and the elderly, cultivation of crops.

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